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Building a Safety Program in Iraq

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TIKRIT, Iraq- "Give a man a fish; you have fed him for a day. Teach a man to fish; and you have fed him for a lifetime." (Author

Our primary role and responsibility in Iraq is to help our Iraqi colleagues to metaphorically fish for themselves – at least that's what our safety representative believes.

A little over a year ago, one of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Gulf Region Division's Iraqi translators was selected to be a representative for the Gulf Region North District. He was selected because he had familiarity with the Corps; spoke excellent English, Kurdish and Arabic; strove for excellence; and was concerned for the well being of his fellow countrymen - all necessary ingredients on the Safety Team.

In January 2006, 10 students (eight Iraqis) attended a two-day class on Safety and Health. The topics, presented by GRN safety officer John Blandamer, included: Fall Protection, Excavation, Electrical and Power Tool Safety. The basis of the course is that there are methods to allow the work to be completed while maintaining a safe workplace. The goal is to make accidents a rare occurrence. It takes a little thought before beginning the project.

In Iraq, this idea unfortunately, is not common. Even in the United States, safety is not always practiced.

After attending this course, Rizgar A. Mohammed aggressively pushed forward the needle of safety in his life, on his projects and in his community.

To accomplish his goals, Rizgar dialogues with members of the Kurdish Provincial Government to adopt Safety and Health Regulations to protect all the workers. He wants to see an end to the number of accidents and deaths on all construction projects in his community, not just on Corps projects.

Rizgar suggested a certain percentage of the contract cost in Iraq should be dedicated to safety.

"When safety isn't put up front in the contract, the contractor may not dedicate sufficient resources," Rizgar said. When the safety budget is limited, the contractor purchases a lesser quality of safety equipment (scaffolding, hardhats and other Personal Protection Equipment). If there is none at all, he explained.

Rizgar also suggested that safety officers should be assigned to each project site. These safety officers can be on a site every day to observe work practices and train the different crews. His goal is to have trained individuals dedicated to be safety officers on every project.

Rizgar also wants to offer the on-site training course to contractor representatives, and asked that the GRN Safety Office provide certificates of achievement to students that took the course.

On Dec. 12-14 in a Dahuk hotel, Rizgar presented the course to 15 Iraqi contractors. He found the students by encouraging them to hire people proficient in English with technical engineering or health degrees, and then encouraging them to take his course.

At the completion of the course, everyone exchanged contact information, which is the initial step to building a safety community. Participants also were provided compact discs of the Safety and Health Requirements Manual EM 385-1-1 in both English and Arabic, numerous sample safety reports, safety quick sheets and other Power Point presentations to use as references.

In addition to the newly trained safety officers, there are seven other students who meet once a week. So by the end of January, there will be 22 new safety representatives.

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